

ArtSeen

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JENNIE C. JONES Electric

by Sophie Landres

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO. | JULY 8 – AUGUST 13, 2010

An epiphany came to Jennie C. Jones via a black and white photograph of John Coltrane taken in the Guggenheim Museum in 1960. The iconic white ramps are vertiginous behind him, dotted with the nascent masterworks of white Americans. He gazes steadily into the camera, pointing to his saxophone case. Fifty years later, in a time of digital dominance and aesthetic hybridization, Jones returns to the parallel conversations of avant-garde jazz and abstract art that Coltrane seemed to suggest in the photograph. Listening has thus become the crux of her conceptual practice and the conduit between her auditory and visual artwork.

Electric, at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., concerns sound's materiality as well as Jones's intimate relationship with Modernist art and music. It is also charged with institutional critique. Exclusion of African Americans was as permissible in the Modernist art world as African Americans' cultural contribution was indispensable to the aesthetic that emerged. Jones explores that moment of artistic innovation, discrimination, and missed opportunity, with equal attention to music history and theory.

"Slowly, In a Silent Way, Caged" (2010) is an eight minute and sixty six second looped sound piece, resonating ethereally from two horizontal iPod speakers hung in adjoining rooms. After one speaker plays John Cage's 4'33" (his consummate, 1952 composition of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence), the other plays the first minute of *In a Silent Way*, Miles Davis's first electronic fusion album, which Jones has manipulated by omitting the trumpet and stretching the notes to last four minutes and thirty three seconds.

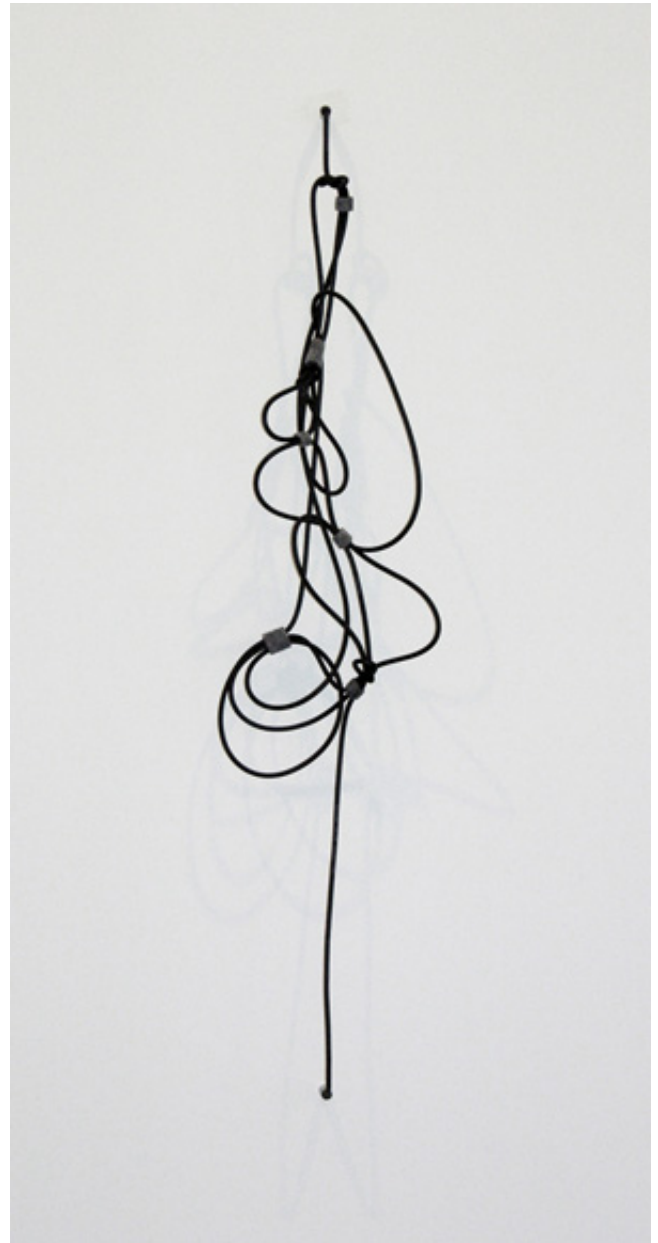
Cage's intent with 4'33" was to draw listeners to sounds in the environment. Jones now fills the environment with another historical exploration of silence, one rarely considered as part of the art

discourse. As Cage debunked the notion of silence as the absence of sound, Jones demonstrates that exclusion from the canon did not ensure an absence of effect. Similar to the analogous treatment of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson in Lorraine O'Grady's "The First and the Last of the Modernists" (2010, debuting at this year's Whitney Biennial,) "Slowly, In a Silent Way, Caged" bookends a period of aesthetic exploration and creates a subtle dialogue between kindred cultural contributors. Her choice of speakers rather than performers acknowledges Davis and Cage's forays into electronics and considers how such devices currently mediate our listening experiences.

For music buffs, the metaphorical riffs do not end there. Jones balances the three movements of 4'33" with the three songs off Davis's album: *In a Silent Way*, *Shhh*, and *Peaceful*, which also appear as titles for other works in the exhibition. *Electric* is replete with this type of wordplay and parallelism. Jones's visual pieces employ audio equipment and music packaging as design elements. They emulate the geometric or gestural aesthetics of Modernism but their material components speak of commercial marketing and a tactile estrangement from music.

"11 Herbie Hancock LP's for Judd: *Takin' Off*, *My Point of View*, *Inventions and Dimensions*, *Maiden Voyage*, *Blow Up*, *Speak Like a Child*, *He Who Lives in Many Places* (neon), *Crossings*, *Sextant*, *The Prisoner and Head Hunters*" (2010) is an austere, plastic CD storage box with blank CD cases arranged as a discography for Donald Judd. Judd-like, sleek, and silvery with a zip of neon, its emptiness symbolizes obsolete technology, collateral waste, and sound's ephemerality. It is Jones's bittersweet homage: a thank you gift and a reminder of jazz's unattributed contribution to the aesthetic lineage that Jones, like Judd, both critiques and extends. She embeds other CD shelves directly into the gallery wall, firmly entrenching black music history into the exhibition context.

Her series of tangled black or neon yellow cord sculptures, mounted by their plugs, resemble both de Kooning gestures and bass or treble clefs. Made of noise-canceling instrument cable, they continue the



Jennie C. Jones, "Shhh #1" (2010). Professional noise canceling instrument cable, wire and felt. Approx. 47 × 10 × 6.25 inches (119.4 × 25.4 × 15.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

themes of silence, exclusion, electronics, and reconfigured Modernism. In the same palette, Jones's collage and ink on paper "Song Container" series lines the main gallery. Again, the works suggest disk packaging, this time deconstructed into shapes, shadows, skewed perspectives and possible musical notation.

Unsatisfied with art limited to an album cover or jazz as studio background music, Jones seeks the latent meanings of aesthetic similitude. Correlating the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk with action painting or placing Ellsworth Kelly color fields or Mondrian's grids in relation to the tightly-structured compositions by the Modern Jazz Quartet, she creates a convergent depiction of the theory and social order that gave rise to these Modernist monoliths.

Re-contextualizing Modernist and commercial aesthetics gives great complexity to Jones's minimalist works. Her manipulation of digital sound files, breadth of research, and use of found objects heed Cage's call to listen, not just to music, but also to the social context in which it exists. And like Coltrane, she carries sound, black history, and an exquisitely erudite application of theory into the whitewashed viewing space.

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